

The THOREAU SOCIETY

BULLETIN

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SPRING, 1963

BULLETIN EIGHTY-THREE

HOLMES, THOREAU, AND PONDS
by Richard Bridgman

Readers of Oliver Wendell Holmes's "medicated" novel, Elsie Venner (1861) must be struck by the unaccountable edge to his remarks about a pond that otherwise never figures in the plot. Gratuitous as Holmes's description is however, its ironic tone does possess a tangential pertinence for another more famous pond in American literature. Dr. Holmes's point in his novel is that this New England pond is sentimentalized by young women (whom it gobbles up), poetized by funereal bards whose elegies manage to transcend the brutal realities of drowning, and frequented by a breed of irresponsible flaneurs.

"Rockland would have been but half a town without its pond; Quinnepeg Pond was the name of it, but the young ladies of the Apollinean Institute were very anxious that it should be called Crystalline Lake. It was here that the young folks used to sail in summer and skate in winter; here, too, those queer old, rum-scented good-for-nothing, lazy, story-telling, half-vagabonds, who sawed a little wood or dug a few potatoes now and then under the pretence of working for their living, used to go and fish through the ice for pickerel every winter. And here those three young people were drowned, a few summers ago, by the upsetting of a sail-boat in a sudden flaw of wind. There is not one of these smiling ponds which has not devoured more youths and maidens than any of those monsters the ancients used to tell such lies about. But it was a pretty pond, and never looked more innocent--so the native "bard" of Rockland said in his elegy--than on the morning when they found Sarah Jane and Ellen Maria floating among the lily pads."

The physical facts here inevitably suggest that Holmes intended his remarks to bear upon Thoreauvian attitudes. For that "half-vagabond" had indeed pointed out that "by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living." And although Thoreau is more associated with bean crops, he did in fact dig a few potatoes, reporting that he sold five bushels of large ones for \$2.50 and nine bushels of small ones for \$2.25. (134-135) Self-maintenance should be, he thought, "not a hardship, but a pastime." (58) And if Thoreau never went so far as to propose that Walden's name be changed, he did point out that it was pure enough for a railroad engineer to think it might be called "God's Drop." (162) In his own veneration for the pond, he variously referred to it as "a vision of serenity and purity," (162) as a mirror, "its surface ever fresh" (158), and with White Pond as "great crystals on the

surface of the earth, Lakes of Light"--all of which are suspiciously similar to the suggestion made by "the young ladies of the Apollinean Institute."

The reference in the paragraph from Elsie Venner to pickerel fishing has further reverberations. When, in his essay "The Seasons," Holmes related the pleasures of fishing for tomcod and smelt, he was coolly ironic towards Thoreau's enthusiasms. "I cannot make this rever fishing as poetical as Thoreau has made pickerel fishing on Walden, yet it is not without its attractions." (VIII, 181) Holmes's comment refers to Thoreau's lyrical tributes to Walden pickerel in which he could not resist making invidious comparisons to other more pedestrian fish such as Holmes's tomcod. Pickerel possess "a quite dazzling and transcendent beauty," Thoreau observed, which "separates them by a wide interval from the cadaverous cod and haddock whose fame is trumpeted in our streets." (239) In his pickerel rage, Thoreau felt obliged to disparage, not only other fish, but their grounds as well. "All the fishes which inhabit this pond are much cleaner, handsomer, and firmer-fleshed than those in the river and most other ponds, as the water is purer..." (154)

No wonder then that throughout his lifetime, Holmes the river-angler genially undercut the man he characteristically named "the hermit of a couple of seasons" (XI, 17) In the midst of his agreeable invitations for the reader to "follow Miss Cooper in her most interesting walks," to "listen to Mr. Cabot's admirably told story," to "enjoy the enthusiastic descriptions of Mr. John Burroughs," and to "marvel" at Mr. Flagg's rendering of bird notes, Holmes suggested that one go "squat with Thoreau in his hovel by the side of Walden." (VIII, 183)

In his biography of Emerson, Holmes admitted that Thoreau had lent Emerson "a new set of organs of sense of wonderful delicacy," and that he had "taught him to give an outline to many natural objects which would have been poetic nebulae to him but for his companionship." (XI, 300-301) Otherwise though, Holmes felt that Emerson had wisely remained aloof from the influence of "this nullifier of civilization, who insisted on nibbling his asparagus at the wrong end." (XI, 66) Emerson would never, commented the Autocrat, "leave all the conveniences and comforts of life to go and dwell like a savage." (XI, 109) Even when he acknowledged Thoreau's originality, Holmes implied that it was possibly improper, probably cracked, and most certainly childish. So he called Thoreau: "That unique individual, half college-graduate and

half Algonquin, the Robinson Crusoe of Walden Pond, who carried out a schoolboy whim to its full proportions, and told the story of Nature in undress as only one who had hidden in her bedroom could have told it." (XI, 55)

Such persistently ironic references to Thoreau explain. I think, why Holmes paused in Elsie Venner to deliver himself of an otherwise extraneous opinion of New England ponds and their celebrants.

University of California: Berkeley

1. The Works of Oliver Wendell Holmes, V (Boston, 1892), 47. Subsequent references in text are to this edition.
2. Walden, intr. Norman Holmes Pearson (New York, 1948), p. 56. Subsequent references in text are to this edition.

THE BORROWED AXE--A BIBLICAL ECHO IN WALDEN?

By Paul O. Williams, Duke University

Thoreau has often been twitted for his borrowing the axe with which he set out to live independently at Walden. He made no secret of this borrowing, instead calling attention to it with the statement, "It is difficult to begin without borrowing, but perhaps it is the most generous course thus to permit your fellow-men to have an interest in your enterprise."⁽¹⁾

Later in Walden Thoreau recounts "many years ago" having lost his axe through the ice, retrieving it by snaring it with a loop of rope tied around a long birch pole.⁽²⁾ It is very likely that the axe lost was not the same axe as the one borrowed, the loss of the axe apparently being the experience of an earlier time.

However, I am concerned with the facts that both incidents were included in Walden and that, taken together, they show an interesting resemblance to II Kings 6:1-7, which in the Authorized Edition of the Bible reads as follows:

"1 And the sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, Behold now, the place where we dwell with thee is too strait for us. 2 Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell. And he answered, Go ye. 3 And one said, Be content, I pray thee, and go with thy servants. And he answered, I will go. 4 So he went with them. And when they came to Jordan, they cut down wood. 5 But as one was felling a beam, the axe head fell into the water: and he cried, and said, Alas, master! for it was borrowed. 6 And the man of God said, Where fell it? And he shewed him the place. And he cut down a stick, and cast it in thither; and the iron did swim. 7 Therefore said he, Take it up to thee. And he put out his hand, and took it."

Here we see that a borrowed axe was used to build a house by a body of water, away from a society that was regarded as "too strait." When this axe was lost in the water, it was recovered by means of a stick, in a manner not very different, aside from the miraculous aspect, from Thoreau's way of retrieving his own axe.

While the similarity may simply be coincidental, we do recall that Thoreau built his house over a woodchuck burrow and moved into it on the Fourth of July. Hence one may speculate that Thoreau's borrowing of the axe may also have a symbolic overtone, the attempt to establish an identity with the prophet

Elisha, who with his followers also built a house apart from society.

1 Walden (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. 36.
2 Pp. 161, 162.

THE ANNUAL MEETING . . .

The 1963 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society will be held on Saturday July 13th at 10:30 a.m. in the First Parish Church in Concord, Massachusetts. After a business meeting and election of officers, T. L. Bailey will deliver his presidential address and Odell Shepard will be the speaker of the day. A luncheon will be served at noon (reservations should be placed in advance with Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, 22 Elm St., Concord). In the afternoon there will be a trip to the Fruitlands Museum at Harvard, Mass., where Thoreau's friend Bronson Alcott conducted his ill-fated communal experiment in 1843. For those who wish to remain in Concord, there will be presented a series of tape recordings of radio broadcasts on Thoreau. At the evening session at the First Parish Church, Richard Borden, president of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, will present a film on "Our Wild Life Heritage"; Roland Robbins and Edwin Way Teale will present a tape recording of "Thoreau Sounds"; and Walter Harding will read a chapter from his forthcoming biography of Thoreau.

THE ANNUAL ELECTION . . .

The nominating committee (August Derleth, Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, and Carl Bode, chairman) will present the following slate of officers at the annual meeting: President (1963-4), Walter Harding; President-elect (1964-5), Roland Robbins; Vice-president (1963-4), Mrs. Herbert Hosmer; Secretary-treasurer (1963-4), Walter Harding; members of the executive committee (1963-6), Brooks Atkinson and Reginald Cook. Further nominations may be made from the floor at the annual meeting.

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summaries of scholarship on various points. There is a brief and interesting introduction. The format is good. Some annotations are unfortunately out-of-date and there are some unfortunate typographical errors in the text, but these minor flaws can be corrected in future printings or editions which will certainly be called for.--J. Lyndon Shanley.

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Seth M. Smith, 404 Penn Oak Road, Flourtown, Pa., is interested in getting in touch with any members in the Philadelphia area to form a local chapter of the Thoreau Society.

In the spring, 1962, bulletin it was incorrectly announced that Edwin Proctor read a paper at the Concord centennial celebration. The reader of the paper was Mr. Peter Hackett of Northbridge.

This bulletin was paid for by the life membership of Mr. Eric Reid of Wakefield, Mass.

Prof. Norman Foerster, 1480 San Leandro Park Road, Santa Barbara, Calif., has given to the Thoreau Society Archives in Concord Free Public Library, a large collection of photographs of Thoreau sites in Concord which he took in 1905.

The Thoreau Society, Inc., is an informal organization of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. President, T.L. Bailey, Cleveland, O.; Vice-president, Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass.; Secretary-treasurer, Walter Harding, State University College, Genesee, N.Y. Annual membership (including subscription to publications), \$2; life membership, \$25. All memberships run July 1 to July 1. Annual meetings are held in Concord, Mass., in mid-July.